

Presenter: Commander, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division Col Tom James and Commander, 31st Iraqi Army, Brigade Gen. Abdul Amir

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DoD News Briefing with Col. James and Gen. Amir from Iraq

(Note: General Amir's remarks are provided via interpreter)

COL. GARY KECK (director, Department of Defense Press Office): Well, good morning, everyone. Welcome to the briefing room. I'm Colonel Gary Keck, as you may well know. Mr. Whitman has been held up so he asked me to go ahead and moderate, as I have on occasion.

So good morning to our briefers from Iraq, who have the privilege of having with us today: Colonel Tom James, who's the commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division. And with him is Brigadier General Abdul Amir, who commands the 31st Iraqi Army Brigade. Colonel James' brigade has been operating as part of Multinational Division-Center since December of 2007.

This is Colonel James' second time with us, briefing via DVIDS. He spoke to us in February last, so -- just to remind you. They're coming to us from the Coalition Press Information Center in Baghdad.

And with that, I'll turn it over to Colonel James for any opening comments he may have.

I guess we won't. Hold on, we've lost our DVID signal. Stand by. (Technical difficulties.)

Now I have no idea if you heard any of my introduction or not. We'll have to -- we'll have to play this by ear and try and get it moving if we get him back.

STAFF: (Off mike.)

COL. KECK: They did, okay. So -- I wasn't.

STAFF: (Off mike.)

COL. KECK: Okay. That's about when we lost them.

Colonel James, it's Colonel Keck at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

COL. JAMES: Gary, I hear you good. How do you hear me? Over.

COL. KECK: We hear you well. We lost you for a minute. I've already done the introductions and told them who you are, so let's go ahead and begin it with your opening statements.

COL. JAMES: Yeah, that would be great. And we did hear you, with the opening introduction. And I just would like to thank everyone again for letting us come today and talk to you. And hope you're having a good morning over there.

I do have beside me a distinguished friend, a warrior and a patriot, Brigadier General Abdul Amir, the commander of the 31st Iraqi Brigade, as you told the audience earlier.

He is responsible for the security in the Babil province, and I'd like to start with his opening statement. I'll follow with a short statement, and then we'll answer questions. So I'd like to pass it off now to General Abdul Amir.

(Note: The interpreter is off mike at the beginning of the brigadier general's statement.)

GEN. AMIR: (Off mike) -- Islami, and all these areas used to be under their control completely in the past, areas such as Jurf al- Sakhr, Maharat (sp) and Diyala and other areas in northern Babil.

Be some areas only Shi'a lives in this area, and became sanctuary places for the extremist militia. And they operate in Hashimiyah, Kifl and Hamzah area.

The third area is both sectors (sic) live in it, which is Sunnis and Shi'a, and this area used to encounter sectarian violence in the past, with support through neighboring countries to one group over another.

Each of these areas requires a special remedy. In the first and second areas, we have to use force against the armed groups, such as al Qaeda and Islamic Army, and against the militia. But areas that -- occupied by both sectors (sic), we concentrate on -- support the national reconciliation and create environment so they can work with each other. In the area we needed to increase our intelligence information and method to work with both sectors.

Our mission now is -- first mission is to control our area of operations, defeat al Qaeda and the outlaws, militias, and protect innocent people.

Our second mission is to secure the infrastructure, such as power plants, bridges, from any kinds of damages or attacks. Third, we impose the law and orders and support the Iraqi police. We increase our training capability through the work with the U.S. forces. Another thing, we secure the election sites to ensure free, fair election.

During this year, the security situation improved rapidly because of several reasons. First, the joint operations between Iraqi security forces and the U.S. forces, especially working with Colonel James, the 4th Brigade commander, and his battalion commanders, such as Colonel McDowell (sp), Lieutenant Colonel Gechel (sp). We work hands to hands together. We use the method of offensive operation. Also, we work with the battalion commanders to ensure the safety and security of all the areas.

Another reason for security improvement is the people roles of supporting the Iraqi security forces and provide information to the Iraqi security forces and to the U.S. forces, and also this increases the trust between U.S. and the citizens. The Sons of Iraq program also played great roles in improving the security situation. Also, the U.S. forces provide enormous economical projects to support farmers, civilians, schools, roads and clean up canals for farmers. All this creates a good cooperation and a great environment with the Iraqi and the Iraqi citizens.

In addition to the security improvement, there was a great improvement in the capability of the Iraqi army. Last year we were working with two battalions. This year we are working with four battalions. Next year we will have new equipment, such as artillery forces. At this moment, at this time, we also -- we have Lieutenant Colonel McDowell (sp)) training our -- one of our platoons on a route clearance method and such missions like that.

I work closely with Colonel James, the 4th Brigade commander, in combat and in training, planning, information gathering and executing joint missions. The MiTT team from the U.S. forces train our forces in combat missions and combat training.

For instance, yesterday we executed a successful mission in the area of al-Haswah. We confiscated -- it's a joint operation between the U.S. and the Iraqi army. We confiscated almost 300 pierces of weapons that has no license and been used to escalate the sectarian violence. Also, we detained numerous of extremists and wanted individuals, and this will increase the security and the safety of this area.

And we work closely with the U.S. forces and our relations is great, and this including our good relationship also with Babil province police. I am very optimistic for the security situation in all Babil province in the next future.

Thank you.

COL. JAMES: Transitioning to my opening statement.

First, a quick orientation to our operating environment. Babil province is located 50 kilometers south of Baghdad, on the key avenues of approach into the capital city. The population is an estimated 1.2 million Iraqis, 70 percent Shi'a and 30 percent Sunni. The majority of the Sunni population resides in the northern portion of the province, in and around the towns of Jurf al-Sakhr, Iskandariyah, Jabella and and Diyara (ph). Currently the majority of our combat brigade is positioned in north Babil.

We maintain a Military Transition Team, as well, further in the provincial capital of Hillah, and we are partnered with the 31st Iraqi army brigade under General Abdul Amir's command and control. And we also work very closely with the Babil police throughout the province.

Our mission is, in partnership with the Iraqi security forces, to secure the population, defeat extremists and neutralize resistance groups, increase the professionalism of the Iraqi security forces, build the capacity of government institutions and economic programs, and transition security and local development tasks to the Iraqi security forces and government over time.

The essential point of what I want to make today is this: The population feels secure and the quality of life is improving. There are two main reasons for this current condition. First, the Iraqi security forces have improved significantly and in partnership with coalition forces have drastically improved the overall security situation in Babil province. Second, the improved security has enabled positive growth in governance and economic systems, creating tangible improvement in the daily lives of Babil citizens.

As stated earlier, the population of Babil province is mostly Shi'a, with a significant Sunni minority population located in the northern portion of the province. The majority of al Qaeda threat is in north Babil, and the majority of extremist militia threat is in central and southern Babil.

Over the past year, the security situation has improved significantly. Attacks in July of last year averaged eight per week. Now attacks are down to less than one per week.

Security improvements are based on three key factors: first, a highly professional and greatly improved Iraqi security force; second, the Sons of Iraq program; and third, combined security forces. That is Iraqi security forces and coalition forces living with the population, on distributed patrol bases and joint security stations throughout our area of operations.

The Iraqi security forces have made enormous progress in Babil province. Brigadier General Abdul Amir and the 31st Iraqi Army Brigade routinely conduct precise, intelligence-based operations, as you heard from his statement. They are responsible for disrupting al Qaeda and extremist militia in several locations throughout the province.

They conducted numerous operations to defeat al Qaeda in the -- (word inaudible) -- region. And during the extremist militia uprising in March of this year, they defeated militia in Hilla and several other towns in Central and Southern Babil province.

As a result, the people of Babil trust the 31st Brigade in providing them security. General Abdul Amir also has a strong relationship with the Babil police chief

and his police force. And the police continue to improve and play a positive role in providing security as well.

The Sons of Iraq program are another stabilizing force in Babil. We employ just over 9,500 SOIs, who man static checkpoints to thicken security lines between the Iraqi army and Iraqi police positions.

The third factor is the improved security, correction, in the improved security situation is the fact that the Iraqi security forces and coalition partners are forward deployed and living with the population in patrol bases and joint security stations.

The persistent presence of these security forces highlight to the people that the ISF is committed to their security. And it stimulates human intelligence and, as well, productive economic activities.

As a result of the positive security situation, we are seeing an increase in governance, proficiency and economic productivity. Within the last three months, the governor, province council leaders and directors general have traveled to North Babil, a feat that was inconceivable a year ago.

We also see increase in government-sponsored projects and essential services. There are currently 186 government of Iraq- sponsored projects in North Babil. These projects are an enormous amount of progress because at this time last year, GOI-funded projects were virtually non-existent.

We also have assisted 400 families back to their neighborhoods that were once occupied by extremists. We still have work to do specifically focused in the areas of electricity, water and agricultural initiatives. But with the newly formed connections between local and province-level government, such improvements are achievable.

We are focused on several key tasks looking to the future -- first, successful execution of free, fair and safe elections; second, GOI-driven SOI or Sons of Iraq transition to other productive employment; and third, assisting with professionalization of the Iraqi security forces; fourth, assisting with local economic development to increase employment opportunity; and fifth, basing adjustments of the Iraqi army and police into key locations we see that's required for security -- all of these tasks while simultaneously conducting relentless pursuit of extremists with our Iraqi partners.

Overall, we are extremely optimistic about the security situation in Babil province because of the professional actions of the Iraqi security forces, and the population's strong desire for peace and stability. We believe these conditions will stimulate positive governance and economic growth for the future and eventually result in irreversible, sustainable security.

I cannot close without mentioning the superb work by our outstanding soldiers and the sacrifice of their wonderful families -- their ability to adapt rapidly to extremely

complex situations never ceases to amaze me -- and as well their Iraqi counterparts that fight alongside them. They adjust as well, phenomenally.

Thank you very much, and now we're prepared to answer your questions.

COL. KECK: Okay. Thank you, gentlemen. We'll go ahead and start off here. And Al, go ahead.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. Can you tell us what, if anything, has been the impact of the end of the surge in your area? Are you working with less U.S. troops? And how have you -- if so, how have you made up for that?

COL. JAMES: I -- right, Al. I got a -- look, the deal is with our area -- is we were not a surge brigade. We RIP'd one for one -- RIP means "relief in place" -- with the 4th Brigade of the 25th Airborne out of Fort Richardson, Alaska.

But we did witness and see the fruits of the surge, because our division and 1st -- correction -- 2nd Brigade and 3rd Brigade of our division were both surge brigades, and the division was a surge division into Central, Multinational Division Central.

So what that allowed was the combat power for us, with our Iraqi security force counterparts, like Abdul Amir, to be able to execute operations distributed throughout the area of operation. So we conducted an operation. We had sufficient forces to allow us to occupy patrol base and joint security stations, with the population, distributed throughout the area of Multinational Division Central. And what allowed the population to see was, "Wow, they're here to secure us, and now we understand that security is for real." And they provided intelligence, and as well you started to see the governance and economic systems grow.

And what that did was bought time for the Iraqi security forces that had developed over time, in contact with the enemy, to start to increase their capacity and development, because we had increased force capability.

So as the surge forces start to come out, the Iraqi security forces are at a level to be able to handle that and fill that gap that was -- it was -- is not really a gap that was created, because they're moving out, because it is filled with the security force capability of the Iraqi army and Iraqi police and their increased capability.

So we see strong impacts from the surge in our area, and that's what we see from our perspective. Now that wasn't necessarily in our AO, our area of operation, because we were not a surge brigade. But it was in our division, and we witnessed some of that.

And if I could, General Abdul Amir, do you have any points that you'd like to make related to the surge and increased coalition forces in our area that related and impacted on your operations?

(Pause.) If Ben could translate --

GEN. AMIR: Right now, all our AO -- area of operations -- for my brigade and the 4th brigade -- we are working in the same area of operation together as a joint forces. In my belief, we are in control completely as an Iraqi security force in our area of operations and all the area we are -- in our AO, basically.

COL. JAMES: One thing that I would like to add to that is that what it allowed us to do -- although we were not a surge brigade, it allowed us to concentrate in our area as opposed to trying to fill the area that was filled by surge. So it was -- the savings of force were allowed to be applied elsewhere where needed, and that increased our security capability.

Q This is David Morgan from Reuters. Can you please rank for us the security threats that you now face in Babil province in terms of their importance and give us an assessment of their numbers and capabilities?

COL. JAMES: We sure can. General Abdul Amir, I'd like to defer to you first for a comment on that. What do you see as the primary threats in our area of operation?

GEN. AMIR: Babil province area of operation and northern Babil -- as I mentioned in my brief, there were some areas used to live under the control completely of al Qaeda. Some areas used to be under the control of the sectarian violence, which Sunnis and Shi'a lived together in these areas. But because we conducted numerous amount of operations -- joint operation between U.S. forces and Iraqi army forces, we were able to disable all these cells and enemies. We detained most of al Qaeda leaders in all of the areas.

Recently, all the area is under our control. We are conducting basically daily patrolling in several areas -- such area that encounter some sectarian violence such as the Jabella area. We are working through the tribes and pushing them forward for the national reconciliation. And we are -- patronage and held all these conference and ceremony for these tribes and tribal leaders so we could create a real reconciliation between the fighting tribes.

I would love to say and I would like to say that all area of operation in northern Babil is under control 100 percent. There is no threat from al Qaeda. There is no threat from the extremist militia and the outlaw militias. Thank you.

COL. JAMES: And I'd like to add to what General Abdul Amir says. And he is tracking 100 percent. The key here, though, is that as we plan for a potential threat in Babil province, we see the number one threat being extremists that are influenced by al Qaeda, that could potentially attack us with suicide vests, bombs or IEDs, and as well vehicle-borne IEDs on concentrations of population that may be observing a religious festival or something like that. But for the most part we've seen that the Iraqi security

forces have been able to take that under control and prevent that from happening in the recent past here.

So we continue to work with that. So that's the first one. And then as he mentioned as well, the militia. The militia threat -- they're much more capable with the EFP and potentially indirect fire systems, but we have not seen that in Babil province in the past month and a half to two months, based on an aggressive Iraqi security force campaign supported by coalition forces.

But those are the two threats. And I would rank order them in that way: al Qaeda with a large explosive attack being number one, and that's what we continue to prepare against; and number two would be an EFP or indirect fire attack by extremist militia as the number two threat.

And you asked about numbers of those. I see that as very minimal. The organization related to al Qaeda is severely disrupted, as described by General Abdul Amir, and as well the militia are as well in Babil province. And we're seeing that based on the lack of the attacks, and as we continue to develop our intelligence we're seeing that.

Q I think you said that the pace of attacks has now fallen off to about one per week. What element is responsible for these attacks, by and large, would you say? And how would you describe the attacks themselves?

COL. JAMES: I would answer that and then pass off to General Abdul Amir. We see that the recent attacks are IEDs of a primitive nature. What we're seeing is IEDs that are affixed to vehicles, that are targeting SOIs. And these are typically influenced by al Qaeda. And what they want to do is discredit the Iraqi security forces. And they're going after mid- to lower-level leaders in that program. And so that's the primary threat that we've seen over the last couple of weeks, and that is what General Abdul Amir has oriented his focus in the operation he described earlier on. So we continue to focus on that, and that is our primary threat. But like I said, that is significantly decreased and we're seeing less than one a week.

And I'd like to pass that off to General Abdul Amir for his thoughts.

GEN. AMIR: All these attacks that Colonel James talks about, the last two months it was targeted the SOI leaders, and it was concentrated in al-Haswah and Iskandariyah area.

Yesterday and today we executed in a joint operation in Al Haswah area. The result was great, and we detained a lot of wanted people. We captured a lot of weapons, and we have plans to control all kind of attacks in the next future.

COL. JAMES: Two points that I'd like to follow up on that is, we're finding that since the attacks are so much lower, we're able to focus resources, both Iraqi security

force and coalition in support, on these respective areas, and are able to quickly disrupt the enemy and over time locally defeat them as they attempt to do these attacks.

And one other point is al Qaeda -- the weakening over time is obvious to us based on their ability to deliver an effective IED. Typically, we have seen in the past the suicide vest or the deep- buried IEDs. We're not seeing those anymore. We're seeing them to be much more primitive and much more less effective. And we see this as a very positive thing.

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. You mentioned that one of your missions was to prepare for upcoming elections, and I'm wondering what, if any, effect the prospect of elections is having on security -- the security situation in your area. And I was wondering if these attacks involving the SOI were interfactional, or is it Shi'a against SOI?

COL. JAMES: Okay. First off, the election piece -- the Iraqi security forces and the government of Iraq in Babil province have made enormous progress and have done a really good job of developing a security plan for the elections, and are in the process as we speak of implementing them. And I'd like to pass that on to General Abdul Amir to talk about the prep for the elections.

GEN. AMIR: Our security plan for the election is, we have in Babil 23 registration sites to prepare for the incoming election, provincial election. A lot of people going to these sites register their names, the Iraqi army and Iraqi police conducting a joint plan with the support of the coalition forces to secure the sites and protect the populace.

The attack, as I said, I mentioned before, increased only on the SOI's leaders now.

And in God's will, we will have a plan, we will have a remedy for all these attacks.

But the election sites are secure. And we are preparing for any kind of threats. And we will secure and make all the sites safe, for the people to go to these sites and vote.

We don't think that all these attacks will affect or have any kind of effect, against the SOI program or against the election in general. On the other hand, the SOI leaders are running through this election. And they are forming their own political parties.

The Sunnis in Northern Babil have a great desire to share and enter this election because they feel the mistake they commit in the past, when they did not share in this election. But this time, they have a great desire to enter this election so they could get more seats and representatives, in the provincial councils and in all the local governments.

Thank you.

COL. JAMES: If I could just add a couple of points to that as well, I had the distinct pleasure of attending several planning sessions -- with General Abdul Amir and Major General Fadil, the police chief of Babil province -- related to election security.

They have just over 20 sites that are registration sites they're securing. And they have a very detailed plan. And they've allocated and distributed resources, to protect those sites, to allow both Shi'a and Sunni to participate in registration.

And that is a true good-news story that we're seeing in Babil province, that General Adbul Amir mentioned, was that the Sunni want to participate. They held out last time and they see the fruits of democracy and want to pursue them. So that is a very positive situation.

Going back to the tail end of your question, about factions and about the IED strikes that we've seen to this point over the last couple of weeks, we see that as al Qaeda, Sunni-based extremists trying to influence the Iraqi security forces, correction, not the Iraqi security forces -- Sons of Iraq program, which is predominantly Sunni.

So we're not seeing sectarian violence at all at the levels that were in the past; very minimal if at all in Babil province. So this is just a al Qaeda attempt to try to discredit the Sons of Iraq program.

Q Something else I was driving at is, whether you're seeing any election-related violence, as groups maneuver for position ahead of provincial elections.

COL. JAMES: We are not seeing any violence related to elections.

General Amir, anything on your end.

GEN. AMIR: Right now the registration for voting is moving smoothly and nicely with no any problems.

We identify one month for registration time. Until now, we have not registered or recorded any incident regarding this. As Colonel James said, all the people want the elections. All the people want to share in this incoming election.

In case of that there is in any kind of attacks or any plans of attacks from al Qaeda or any extremist militia against any of these registration sites or against any individual who try and share in this election, we are ready. We are ready for all these people.

Thank you.

COL. KECK: Okay. Well, gentlemen, we have run over a little bit for our time. We appreciate your patience with us. And as is tradition, we would like to turn it back over to you for any final comments you may have or any points that you would like to make that we didn't talk about.

GEN. AMIR: Thanks for everybody, for my brigade, every soldier in 31st Iraqi Army Brigade. I send my greeting to all the families of the U.S. soldiers -- 4th Brigade soldiers who are sacrificing with their life, with their efforts, with everything to help us here, for Iraq and for helping us to reform and build our armed forces. And I am hoping that they will go home safely and see their family.

And thanks for Colonel James and his brigade for all the sacrifices that they gave in Iraq. Again, thanks for the "Hero Brigade," he said, Colonel James' brigade, the 4th Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, for all the help that they provided for my brigade and for Iraq and for the Iraqi army.

Thank you very much.

COL. JAMES: In my closing statement, I am honored to serve with the Iraqi security forces. They are true patriots and we have built relationships that will last a lifetime. I thank them and their families and the people of Iraq for their sacrifices in pursuit of a safe and secure country so that democracy and freedom can flourish.

I would also like to thank the American people, especially the families of our servicemen and women for their sacrifices and their support as well, as we're forward-deployed here.

And I would like to close with thanking our servicemen and women for their contribution to freedom and those that have paid the ultimate sacrifice on the field of battle, and that's both Iraqi army as well as coalition force and U.S. forces that have fought hand-in-hand to make Iraq a secure place.

So thank you very much for letting us talk to you this morning, and have a good day.

COL. KECK: Thank you again, gentlemen.

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